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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 001074

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREF](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: BELARUSIAN YOUTH ACTIVELY WORKING, JUST NOT
TOGETHER

REF: A. MINSK 1061

[1](#)B. MINSK 1018

[1](#)C. MINSK 1062

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Belarusian youth groups have redirected their attention away from post-election stagnation to resuming activities to bring about change in Belarus. Some are actively preparing for the January 2007 local elections, while others are focusing on distributing information, providing legal assistance to harassed youth, increasing activism and awareness through demonstrations, and establishing support networks at home and abroad. Despite a proposal for the creation of a youth coalition to unite youth groups and parties, genuine cooperation seems unlikely, especially in Minsk, as each organization is consumed with its own priorities. Nonetheless, it is encouraging to see the youth actively working to promote change in Belarus. End Summary.

Local Elections a Priority for One, Dismissed by Others

[1](#)2. (C) Deputy head of the newly formed youth wing of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPFM) party Sergey Semenuk told Poloff on September 27 that his organization's first priority is the upcoming local elections. BPFM, which was founded on September 24 and has approximately 500 members nationwide, plans to support the United Democratic Forces' (UDF) plans for the local elections in addition to nominating 50 youth candidates to run in the elections.

[1](#)3. (C) However, head of youth group Third Way (TW) Pavel Morosev advised against youth participation in local elections because he believes that elections are not an effective tool to promote change in a political environment where the outcome is pre-determined. During a meeting with Poloff on September 14, Morosev cited current election and media laws as nearly insurmountable obstacles for opposition candidates. Morosev noted that the only benefit of the elections was the possibility to promote independent ideas, but stressed that elections were not necessary to achieve this goal.

[1](#)4. (C) Press secretary Aleksandr Atroshchenkov from the youth organization formerly known as Zubr recently told Poloffs that his group will also steer clear of the local election campaign. He explained that participation in rigged elections would be a waste of resources. However, Atroshchenkov conceded that the local elections would provide a good opportunity for the opposition to speak to more people about the need for democratic change.

Increasing Awareness and Activism Through Demonstrations

15. (C) Atroshchenkov told Poloff that his organization, which was integrally involved in the planning of the one-year anniversary demonstration of the Days of Solidarity in Minsk on September 16 (ref B), is planning another "freedom themed" mass action for November. He predicted that more than 10,000 people will participate in this event, which will focus on displaying solidarity with the repressed and spreading information about the situation in Belarus. As with the Days of Solidarity event, the organizers plan to apply for permission from the authorities to hold the event in an effort to make it "as legal as possible."

Spreading Information Key to Gaining Youth Support

16. (C) BPFM leader Semenuk proposed the creation of a national newspaper that would appeal to students and working youth. Each paper would contain a national news core, but would be supplemented by contributions from local authors writing about the local issues of the region in which the newspaper will be distributed. They would use these newspapers to educate the youth population about the upcoming local elections and to show their support for political victims who are repressed and imprisoned by the regime.

17. (C) President of the Association of Belarusian Students (ABS) Alena Talapila told Poloff on September 19 that ABS prints a monthly student newspaper that it distributes to approximately 25,000 students at 10 universities within Minsk and seven in the regions. This newspaper is written by students and focuses on issues that are important to young

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people, including politics from the youth point of view.

Working to Promote Internal Change From Outside

18. (C) Other groups are working to promote change in Belarus by informing the international community and the Belarusian diaspora abroad about the situation in Belarus. Morosev told Poloff that TW concentrates its efforts on the Belarusian diasporas abroad and international community since TW believes there are enough people already working within Belarus to promote change in the country. (Note: Most activists and foreign observers dispute this claim. End note.) Morosev plans to travel abroad, including to the U.S., to network with the Belarusian diaspora and to inform them about the youth and opposition's activities. TW is simultaneously trying to tap into existing networks in Belarus, including the flash mob activists and the families of politically repressed victims. In order to connect the two groups, TW will also launch an internet project in November in several languages, including English and German, that aims to provide an objective analysis of Belarusian society from the point of view of the youth and a long-term strategy on how to transform Belarus into a democratic state. The site will also contain links to TW's media project, which includes satirical cartoons that target youth audiences.

Legal Problems Distract Active Youth Leaders

19. (C) Acting Malady Front (MF) leader Sergey Bakhun explained to Poloff on September 22 that MF would like to participate in local election campaigns but confessed that the trials of Dmitriy Dashkevich and others consume the organization. (Note: Dashkevich and the three other MF leaders are charged under Article 193 of the Belarusian Criminal Code, which criminalizes operating an unregistered organization.)

¶10. (C) Bakhun also revealed that the BKGB is conducting an informal investigation on him; he mentioned that BKGB agents have questioned his contacts about their relationship with him. Also, despite the short existence of the party, Semenuk explained that the BKGB has already called in a BPFM member for questioning.

¶11. (C) According to ABS President Talapila, ABS is working with human rights NGO Vyasna to open an office where persecuted students can seek free legal advice. This office would also provide training to youth leaders on how to handle legal issues with the GOB. Bakhun expressed his appreciation to Poloff that Vyasna offers such legal services, but he stressed that MF needs legal counsel on an ongoing basis, not merely ad hoc case by case as NGOs provide.

A Youth Version of the United Democratic Forces?

¶12. (C) Semenuk hopes to form a youth coalition with a structure similar to the UDF, to unite the youth wings of all the major parties and active youth groups seeking change in Belarus. Semenuk told Poloff on September 27 that BPFM has already entered into negotiations with several other youth parties and groups, but he noted that cooperation among youth groups and youth parties is better in the regions than within Minsk. (Note: This analysis reflects existing dynamics within the UDF; i.e., cooperation is better in the regions than in Minsk (ref A). End note.) Still, Semenuk will host a round-table in Minsk with leaders of youth groups and parties to discuss the possibility of forming a coalition sometime in October. (Note: UCP youth leader Kirill Ignatik told Poloffs on September 29 that past attempts to form a united youth front have failed for lack of ideas for joint actions. He mentioned that cooperation among youth was best around the time of the presidential elections but is practically nonexistent now. End note.)

COMMENT

¶13. (C) While some areas of cooperation exist, youth groups and parties are generally focusing on their own goals and priorities. If all the groups and parties were working in a coordinated fashion, they would have the makings of a more formidable opposition coalition effort - information distribution, election campaigns, youth activism,

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demonstrations, and international networks and attention. However, each group has limitations blocking cooperation. There may be hope for better cooperation among youth in the regions, but like the UDF, it seems that sustained unity in Minsk is a distant goal (ref C). Regardless, it is encouraging to see the youth actively working to promote change in Belarus.
Stewart